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Brezhnev's Health of Concern to U.S.

For all his perversity, Soviet President Leonid I. Brezhnev gives Washington policymakers a sense of security. He's an adversary they have come to know. They understand his moods and can anticipate his moves. He is perverse, yes, but predictable.

So despite all the rhetoric and rancor between Washington and Moscow, there is a quiet dread that Brezhnev may be losing control of the Kremlin to unknown forces who may already have portended the future by promoting the aggression against Afghanistan.

An earlier scare rippled through Washington four years ago when secret intelligence reports warned that the ailing Brezhnev might retire. "Brezhnev's long-standing cardiovascular problems and persistent dental troubles have taken a toll," reported a top-secret dispatch Nov. 29, 1975. "His swings in mood have become more pronounced, perhaps in part because of greater use of stimulants and sedatives."

The Central Intelligence Agency learned that Brezhnev's younger brother, Yakov, had told "a foreign friend" that "the Soviet party boss will retire at the party congress in February [1978]."

Brezhnev dropped a similar hint to a group of visiting U.S. senators. "No one is eternal and life being what it is, there comes a time when a person must leave," he said, "whether for retirement or because of illness. . ."

The Soviet interpreter didn't pass on Brezhnev's remark about illness, but the escort officer from the American embassy picked it up. The embassy later reported to Washington in a classified account: "The Soviet interpreter did not translate the reference to illness proba-

bly because he regarded it as too sensitive. . ."

About the same time, Brezhnev also met separately with West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt and French President Giscard d'Estaing. Afterward, German officials tipped off the CIA that "progress on Berlin-related matters was impaired by [Brezhnev's] extreme weariness."

"On one occasion," they reported, "Brezhnev was upset by a sharp disagreeable dispute between foreign ministers [Andrei] Gromyko and [Hans-Dietrich] Genscher, but appeared too weak to stop it."

In a separate report to CIA contacts, French officials confirmed that "Brezhnev seemed tired and not a well man." He tended "to read from briefing notes and frequently repeated himself," the French said.

The CIA was not convinced, however, that Brezhnev would step down. The talk of retirement, suggested a top-secret report, "may have accurately reflected Brezhnev's outlook as of last fall [1975]—one of his 'down' periods—but later clandestine reporting and Brezhnev's more recent public behavior suggests he now means to stay on."

"Clearly," the report added, "Brezhnev has periods of elation and depression, and his intentions may vary as his mood swings. Thus we can expect more contradictory reporting on his plans. . ."

Now, four years later, intelligence analysts again are speculating that Brezhnev's grip on the Kremlin may be weakening. As long as Brezhnev is in charge, they believe, the Soviet Union will hold back from a direct confrontation with the United States.

Like an old grizzly bear, the Kremlin leader as about him an aura of a gory, combative past, but the former ferocity has begun to fade. A top-secret summary, compiled from clandestine evidence by CIA doctors, has this to say about his health:

"Brezhnev's major health problems are cardiovascular. He has both the hypertension and arteriosclerosis heart disease and many years ago suffered a heart attack. He probably has a pacemaker."

"Brezhnev has other but minor medical problems, e.g., occasional attacks of bursitis in the right shoulder and repeated upper respiratory illness. Brezhnev has been diagnosed at times as depressed and at other times as alert, energetic and animated. He has long been prone to substantial mood swings, a disposition that probably has become more pronounced."

"He sometimes uses stimulants and sedatives in excess of the recommendation of his physicians, and this has probably accentuated his mood swings. There is no indication that his intellectual acuity has been significantly affected by these emotional problems and no sign of a lessening of his judgment or contact with reality."

"[But] on several occasions. . ." the CIA summary adds, "he has been described as unable to concentrate, inattentive and fatigued. In addition to reflecting the depletion of his limited physical reserves or the effect of excessive medication, these could be symptoms of depression."

"Periods of depression are likely to lead him to focus on his other health problems, and this could magnify future bouts of depression."